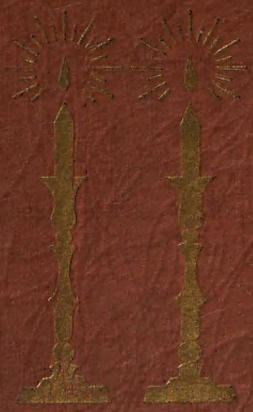
The OPPENHEIM PICTURES



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Nathan Bilfant

The Oppenheim Pictures.. *Depicting Jewish Ceremonial Life*

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INTRODUCTION

THIS series of pictures should strike a deep emotional response in the heart of every Jew. No matter how far we have traveled from the observances that were practiced by our fathers, we have a feeling of reverence for the ceremonies themselves, and a respect for those who feel that these Jewish ceremonials constitute a necessary part of religion.

A book of the Oppenheim pictures was published in Frankfort, Germany, in 1886. The introduction and the descriptions of the pictures, by Dr. Leopold Stein, form the basis for this pamphlet.

The National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods acknowledges its indebtedness also to the Vine Street Temple Sisterhood of Nashville, Tennessee, for its helpful cooperation in the preparation of this booklet.

THE PUBLISHER.

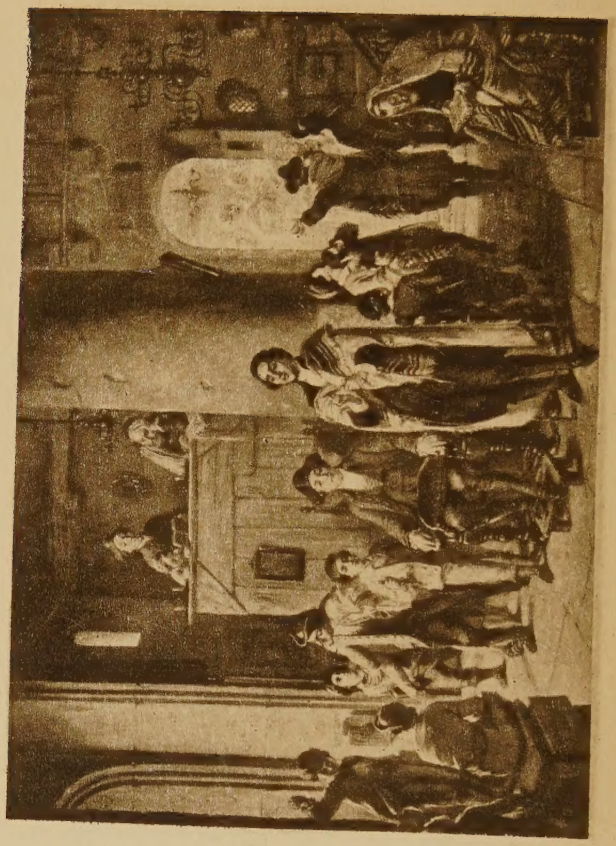
MORITZ OPPENHEIM was born in Hanau, Germany, December 17, 1799. In the home of his pious parents, he witnessed Jewish ceremonial life and was influenced by its spirit.

He began to study painting at an early age. At seventeen, he went to Munich and attended the Art Academy for three years. His painting, "Moses with the Tablets of the Law" attracted the attention of the art world.

After studying under Regnault in Paris, he spent four years in Rome. He was cordially received into the circle of artists of whom Thorwaldsen, Niebuhr and Overbeck were the most influential. While in Rome he was awarded a prize for his painting, "The Lost Son."

In 1825 he settled in Frankfort, Germany. He came into intimate contact with Borne, Goethe and Heine. His painting, "David Playing Before Saul," attracted visitors from all parts of Europe. In 1832, at the instance of Goethe, the honorary title of Professor was conferred upon him. Oppenheim died in 1882.

"The Soldier's Return" is considered his masterpiece. "Ushering in the Sabbath" emphasizes his skill in grouping. Oppenheim's paintings reveal a deep insight into the Jewish soul.

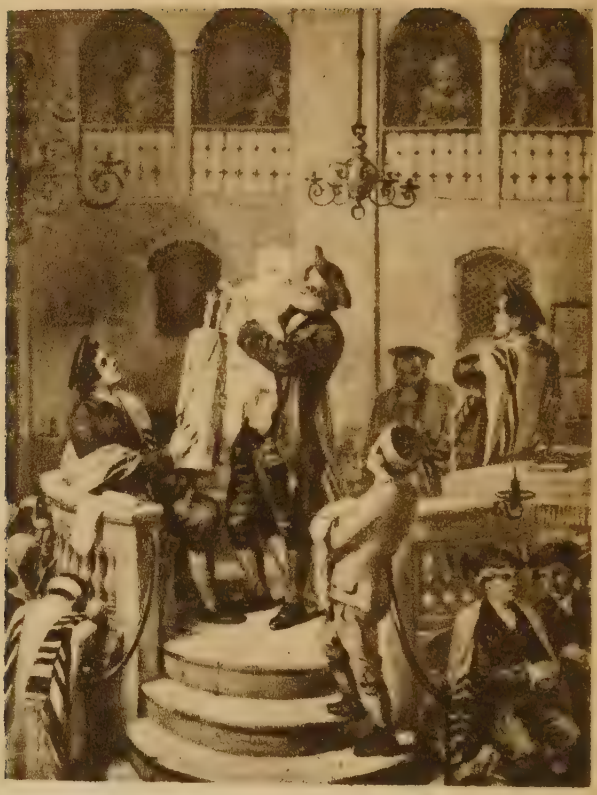


EARLY religious training exerts its influence upon the life of a Jewish child. Here the child is to receive its name. The Brith Milah is about to take place.

Observe the godmother bearing the child to the door of the synagogue where the godfather (sandek), and the mohel await the arrival of the child. You will note that only men are present, a fact which is in evidence throughout the course of these pictures whenever the ceremony takes place within the synagogue. The women wait at the door for the conclusion, when the child will be returned to the arms of the godmother.

The figure of the learned man in the lower right hand corner is a significant type picture of the scholars who spent their days perusing the Torah, their heads wrapped in a prayer shawl, so engrossed in their reading that they were unconscious of the activities about them.

Note the wine and the candle, without which no Jewish ceremonial is complete. See the knife held in readiness, the pillow placed upon the lap of the sandek who will have the honor of holding the child during the ceremony. The sandek, a burgermeister, has been selected because of his rank in the community.



Dedicated to the Torah

III

According to a traditional custom in the Orthodox Synagogue, after the first year of a child's life, on a specially appointed Sabbath, the child is dedicated to the Law of Moses. The child's hand is put upon the Torah after it has been read and folded up, and the words "This is a tree of life for you, so hold firmly to it," are recited.

Once again the women are passive spectators. Not only are they in the gallery but they are partially hidden behind the lattice work which makes it possible for them to obtain only a glimpse of what is going on.

You will notice the old man on the left in deep prayer, the two on the right evidently talking about personal matters, entirely disinterested in the ceremony.

This scene takes place within another corner of the same synagogue, the great Orthodox Synagogue in Frankfort on the Main.

THE fourth picture shows us a scene which we could not parallel in modern times. After the Sabbath service in the synagogue, a child, accompanied by his father, comes to the venerable rabbi for his blessing.

The child listens with great piety and the father, clothed in a Polish garb of silk, looks on with intense emotion, feeling himself blessed in the blessing of the child. The rabbi's kindly smile softens his gentle face.

On the curtain you will see the words from the Decalogue "Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy." Notice also the Eternal Light, the Menorah or massive candelabrum, the flickering candles or Jahrzeit lights. The father is saying "Amen" with his eyes, to the blessing of the rabbi.

It may be that the old man with head enveloped in prayer shawl is completing the reading of the service which he was unable to finish before the other attendants at worship departed. He alone has remained, feeling that he can obtain more wisdom and inspiration by continuing the solitary reading.

The Examination V

On a Sabbath morning the learned man, a Prince in Israel, listens while the child recites what he has learned during the past week in Cheder.

You will observe the dignity of the room, the embossed screen, the beautiful lace cloth on the table, the unusual lighting fixtures, and the magnificent library, all evidences of a cultured and refined home. The learned man has been served, and his daughter smilingly listens while the child recites. The "goodies" on the plate she holds are the reward to the child for a successful examination.

The Bar Mizwah Speech — VI

The Bar Mizwah day is at hand. The boy, now in his thirteenth year, is repeating his Bar Mizwah speech. This is the same child shown in the third picture. In a chanting tone he recites the religious theme assigned to him.

The costumes and furnishings of the room are historically accurate. The attire of the child is costly and beautiful. Note the satin vest, also the cap, covering the head, as is required.

At this period the fundamental thing was to learn all about one's religion. Ability to read the Talmud was considered the highest form of culture. Even at the present time the Orthodox Jews require that their adherents acquaint themselves with prayers for all occasions.

Again no women are present except the mother and the servants.

Typical of a German home scene are the two cats on the lower left. You will notice that the cat is always pictured, never a dog. See also a picture of Frederick the Great hanging on the wall to the left. The lighting fixtures are very similar to the ones in use today. Again we have books although this is a dining room scene, indicating a reverence for learning among the Jews.

Now the wedding scene.

Everything has been arranged to make this ceremony an occasion full of joy and happiness although dignity and reverence blend with the merrymaking.

Under the Chupah the couple stands, their heads covered with a single prayer shawl. The ring, a symbol of holy union, is held by the groom. The rabbi reads and the groom repeats "With this ring art thou consecrated unto me according to the laws of Moses and of Israel."

The pious father and the beaming mother, the merrymaker (sometimes known as the Chupah Schlemiel) in his harlequin jacket, entertaining the crowd, the musician, the wine held in readiness, all are typical of such a scene which is being enacted in the open. You will notice the student. He has permitted his hair to grow long on each side in front of the ears. At that time young students and elderly scholars affected this type of hair cut, which was known as *payas*.

The child on the steps with open mouth awaits the moment for shouting "Mazeltov."

THE mother blesses the Shabbas lights and adds "May my child be enlightened by the Torah as these lights brighten the room."

The mother, attired in her best, is a typically beautiful figure. The father, with watch in hand, awaits the time of departure for the synagogue holding the hand of his son who is impatient to be gone.

Note the double portion of bread, covered as is required, also the wine, and on a server at the left, you will see the fish.

We have here a very richly toned interior, with the magnificently timbered, loftily beamed ceiling, and the very ancient type of chandelier.

You will see the Samovar. Also on the ledge there stands a spice holder which we shall mention later.

On the wall hangs a framed inscription known as Mizrach. Whenever the father recites a prayer he faces in the direction of Jerusalem and this inscription is hung on the wall in that direction.

A picture, truly simple and sincere in its interpretation of one of the most beautiful of Jewish ceremonials.

Sabbath Eve at Home IX

This is one of the most popular of Oppenheim's paintings and it is said that this picture is to be found on the walls of more German Jewish homes than any other of similar nature.

Upon the return from the synagogue, the father blesses the children of the family. The mother, although occupied with a babe in arms, participates in the interest as is shown by the expression on her face. On the right is a character type, no doubt one of the students of the Talmud who comes as a guest for the Friday evening meal. Here again you see the *payas*. Note the intelligence of his expression, the face of a scholar.

Even the small child seems to appreciate the significance of the Friday evening blessing. The atmosphere of this picture prepares us for the calm and repose of the several which follow in this group pertaining to the observance of the Sabbath.

Sabbath Rest

Each one, as you see, is occupied according to his own idea of rest and recreation. The father naps, the mother reads from a book. The young girl and the scholar, while supposedly listening, appear to be more interested in each other than in the reading.

Flowers, books and drapes, together with a genial air of happiness make this picture present an air of comfort and repose.

No doubt the pictures shown thus far have stressed the fact that no grossness is apparent in either the expressions of the people or in their activities, whether work or play.

WITH doors open, the family enjoy the Sabbath quiet, the cessation of all business activities, the day given over to contemplation and relaxation. Again each one occupies himself or herself according to his own idea—resting, reading, or just lounging.

The picture of the sleeping cat adds a pretty tone. Here we obtain some idea of the external architecture of the period.

Serenity and tranquility, security and peace, that is the keynote of this picture, a continuation of a series all tending to depict the mode of observing the Sabbath which was in vogue during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The Conclusion of the Sabbath XII

There was an old tradition that the candle expired with the close of the Sabbath, and here you see it burning low, just on the point of expiration, as the father pronounces the Habdallah, a benediction over the wine, light and spices, the benediction being a thanksgiving to God for having distinguished the holy Sabbath from the rest of the work days, just as He distinguished Israel as a holy nation from the rest of mankind. Here we see the spice holder in use.

The old grandmother's life flame seems as flickering as the candle.

Peace and quiet reign supreme at the conclusion of the day of rest.

ON the fourteenth of Adar, the feast of Purim commemorates the rescue of the Jews of Persia from the plot of destruction contrived against them by Haman. Purim signifies "lots" as Haman had lots cast to decide when the Jews would be slaughtered.

In this picture you will note the genial air of fun and frivolity. Masks are worn by the children, similar to the Hallowe'en celebration of the present day. Merrymaking is the order of the day.

Observe the beautiful oriental rug. Again we see the cat. It was on this day that the women baked Hamantaschen, and sent the cakes and other gifts to friends and neighbors.

Here we have the servants peeping in at the door to watch the children perform.

Throughout the following group of pictures which concern themselves with the various holidays you will note that whenever the celebration takes place at home, the entire family is gathered together, from the smallest babe in arms to the tottering old grandmother and grandfather. Religion is all embracing.

The Passover Seder XIV

The Feast of Spring—The Passover, held on the fifteenth day of Nissan.

Here we have a small family group. You will see the Passover Haggadahs at each place, the empty chair, the wine cups, the pitcher of water, the open door so that Elijah may enter, the flickering candles. With what pride and perhaps some anxiety the mother gazes upon her still unmarried daughter! How dignified the father, attired in snow white *kittel!* The details are executed in this picture with astounding clarity.

No doubt this group has just given utterance to the well known phrase "Next year, in Jerusalem."

THE Feast of Weeks or the Feast of the First Fruits, "Shabuoth," celebrated on the sixth day of Siwan.

Again we are within the sanctuary. The Torah has just been removed from the ark. Under the decoration of flowers and palms the rabbi stands with eyes uplifted in praise to God. Children have strewn the steps with flowers. The babe, as a special dispensation, is to be permitted to touch the Torah. It was considered a great privilege to touch the Torah and whenever it was carried down the aisle, the older men, wrapping their hands in their prayer shawls, would endeavor to touch it.

Note the handsome prayer shawls, the typical characters gathered for the ceremony. Even the children's heads are covered.

Truly indeed is this a festival of the first fruits for it commemorates the day of the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai, which took place about this time of the year.

In modern times Shabuoth, or the Memorial Day of Sinai, has been most properly selected as Confirmation Day, the day of consecration of Israel's youth to the faith of the fathers.

Yom Kippur Eve XVI

Here we have a picture of the entry to the synagogue. To the left a father blesses his son as he enters, the son kissing the father's hand in filial respect. To the right an exchange of greetings between friends. In the center, husband and wife affectionately separate, the husband entering the synagogue and the wife ascending to the balcony. Note the sandals worn by the men, a traditional custom in the synagogue on Yom Kippur.

The composition of the floor is interesting, being of inlaid stone. Tall wax candles are burning on the right and left. Massive doors, elaborate chandeliers, a general air of solidity about the building all present themselves for our attention.

A glimpse of the street shows us a very narrow highway with houses built with high turret and pinnacles. Narrow winding steps evidently lead to the women's balcony in the synagogue.

About the interior view there is an appearance of architecture designed to withstand the wear of timeless ages, just as our religion has withstood the buffetings and abuse of many nations and peoples.

SUKKOTH in the home on the fifteenth day of Tishri.

Again we return to the celebration of the festivals in the home. This is the Festival of Booths, with the temporary structure erected for use during the week of Sukkoth.

Women again take active part in a home celebration, lending their decorative ability to the making of a beautiful place from a rough booth so hastily constructed.

The palm, the citron and the myrtle are symbols of this feast. Vines, palms and flowers are interwoven to make a roof. Here all meals will be served throughout seven days. Again the wine is in evidence. Note the artistic festoons of flowers, the drapes, the handsome cloth on the table. Observe also the expression upon the face of the father. Intelligence, reverence and dignity mingle and blend to make an interesting character study.

Truly a splendid reproduction of a very impressive occasion.

THE Feast of Lights, on the twenty-fifth of Kislev—another joyous holiday.

The lighting of the candles is typical, the father hearing the son recite the blessings.

You will note the small toy. This is known as a *dredel*, meaning something which turns. In our modern parlance the toy would be known as a Put and Take Toy. This was given to the children for their amusement on this holiday.

Chess is being played at the center table, cards within the next room. The pipes fit into the period of this picture of the 1880's, a German home of the times. Books again, drapes as attractive as those of which we boast. The furniture and costumes show the modes of the day.

Referring to the deeds which Hanukkah commemorates, one great man of letters has said "This heroism has not yet been sung or celebrated properly; if it had occurred in Greece, epics would have blazoned it to an eager world; dramatists would have immortalized it in helmeted phrases and generations to generations would have been thrilled by its story acclaim."

And this was from the pen of one who was an enemy of all things Semitic.

The Breadwinner Goes to His Labor XIX

Now we turn from the holidays to a picture of a Jewish father leaving his home for the world beyond the Ghetto. Our attention is attracted by the gesture of the man kissing his hand and placing it upon the Mezzuzah on the door as he makes his exit.

The child has learned charity and gives without hesitation as the beggar approaches.

Chickens in the yard, the old grandfather who has evidently just arisen after taking his rest on the bench, the devout attitude of the mother within, the door and the vestibule all command our attention, as does the architecture of the exterior of the home. The leaden casement windows and arches are interesting.

A picture true to the period which it portrays.

JAHRZEIT AT THE FRONT XX

THE picture is filled with significant details. A Jahrzeit scene. Minyan is being held near the battlefield. This scene is evidently in a French village.

Ten men are present according to the requirements of the faith. Trappings and luggage have been discarded and heaped in the center so that fullest attention may be given in paying tribute to the memory of their honored dead. The cross on the wall has been covered with a shawl. Napoleon's statue is seen on the far left.

The French peasants gaze through the window with great curiosity upon this unusual scene.

Reverence, sadness, devotion and restraint mingle in the tone of this picture which takes place in a shell torn hut in France.

Religion has superseded all external disturbances. The memory of the dead must be honored.

Brisbane has said that the only important thing about a man is his conception of divine intelligence and wisdom and truly such a conception is shown when men feel the urge to withdraw from conflict, if only for the moment, to give vent to their more sacred emotions.

THE SOLDIER'S RETURN XXI

THE concluding picture shows us the return of the soldier, wounded but happy to be home, and all members of the family rejoicing to have him home. The father, too overcome to speak, the mother bearing food with her own hands, too important a duty to relegate to a servant, the younger brother admiring the accoutrements of war, the young sweetheart or wife hanging over the chair, all are at attention upon the returned soldier.

The series closes upon a happy note.

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